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SUBJECT: GOE-BEDOUIN TENSION OVER SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Classified By: ECPO Counselor Catherine Hill-Herndon
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Tension between the Bedouin of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and the GOE has remained high since late April when up to 2,000 Bedouin staged a sit-in on Egypt's border with Israel, alleging that GOE security and development policies discriminate against them. Despite several meetings between Bedouin tribal leaders, North Sinai Governor General Ahmed Abdel Hamid, People's Assembly representatives and Egyptian security officials, a GOE official said, addressing Bedouin grievances will be difficult in the absence of a comprehensive GOE socio-economic development strategy, which does not yet exist. Bedouin tribal leaders have threatened to resume their protests if the GOE fails to address their grievances by July 1. End summary.

Protests prompt negotiations

12. (SBU) Long-simmering tension between the Bedouin of Egypt's Sinai and the GOE threatens to flare again on July 1 if GOE officials do not address Bedouin claims that GOE security and development policies discriminate against them. Periodic peaks in Bedouin-OE friction have occurred for some years, but the most recent episode has persisted since late-April when as many as 2,000 Bedouin held a multi-day protest on Egypt's border with Israel demanding permission to emigrate following the April 25 death of two Bedouin whose vehicle crashed after an encounter with police. One of the vehicle's occupants died after being shot by police when the driver reportedly refused to stop at a security check-point.

13. (C) Spurred by the protests, Bedouin tribal leaders and GOE officials, including North Sinai Governor Ahmed Abdel Hamid, members of the People's Assembly, and security service officials, launched discussions to address Bedouin grievances. According to a GOE source, the parties have made only modest progress on security issues; meeting the Bedouin demands is unlikely. During a June 14 meeting with GOE officials, the Bedouin threatened to resume their border protests if the GOE does not meet their demands by July 1.

Bedouin Political, Social, Economic Demands; GOE Response

14. (C) Bedouin leaders allege that the GOE systematically discriminates against them by failing to integrate them into Egypt's political, developmental, and social framework while refusing to acknowledge their traditions and customs. The demands of the group at the center of the current dispute, and the status of GOE responses, as available, are as

follows:

-- Security: The Bedouin seek the release of the "thousands" of Bedouin they allege the Ministry of Interior (MOI) has detained since the terrorist attacks of 2004, 2005, and 2006. They also ask to deal with Ministry of Defense (MOD) representatives, rather than MOI police, claiming the police are culturally insensitive and use unjustifiable force with them. According to a GOE source, the Bedouin object to the police tactics towards Bedouin women and their "interference" with Bedouin commercial activities. The source also said the MOD cannot serve as the point of contact for the Bedouin because the limits on MoD forces in the demilitarized Sinai would preclude proper oversight. However, he said, the GOE "Higher Security Committee" is reviewing the Bedouin demands, released some detainees following the June 14 meeting with tribal leaders, and may agree to release Bedouin who are not held on terrorism-related charges.

-- Justice: The Bedouin seek assurances that the GOE will prosecute police officers found to use excessive force in dealing with Bedouin. They specifically demand the prosecution of the officer who fired on the Bedouin vehicle on April 25, thereby killing an occupant. GOE officials said police conduct on April 25 was appropriate because the driver did not stop, as required, at the police check-point.

-- Land ownership: The Bedouin ask the GOE to recognize their rights (under customary law) to own land. They complain that since the 1990s, the Tourism Development Authority (TDA), responsible for non-urban development, has regulated land sales, which customary law previously governed, thereby barring them from land they previously settled and requiring them to settle in undeveloped Central Sinai. A GOE official said recognizing customary land ownership rights would be complex given the focus on tourism development in the Sinai.

-- Economic opportunities: The Bedouin request more employment opportunities, particularly in tourism. They allege that tourism industry employers favor non-Bedouin for employment in hotels, restaurants and shops and that the GOE monopolizes prime agricultural and industrial opportunities. For example, the army owns North Sinai's only olive oil factory. Bedouin MPs from North Sinai told emboff that the GOE is working to create economic opportunities to benefit the Bedouin, for example, through a cement factory expansion.

-- Development: The Bedouin seek easier access to potable water and greater GOE focus on overall Sinai development. Agriculture demands have taxed ground water reserves, and prices for drinking water have risen steadily. Some Bedouin own wells and serve as their own distributors, but others have requested that the GOE provide a piped distribution system, or other network to ensure a reliable drinking water supply. On Sinai development overall, the European Commission recently announced a USD 74.2 million development grant that will focus on infrastructure (water and waste management) and poverty alleviation in South Sinai. A GOE official commented that many investors and development proposals exist, but the GOE has traditionally preferred to focus on Cairo and Alexandria and does not have a comprehensive development strategy for the Sinai. He predicted that development proposals would largely remain in the planning stage for the foreseeable future.

-- Education: The Bedouin seek equal access for their children to primary and secondary education, alleging that teachers discriminate against their children in school. The GOE denies this charge.

Possible Outcomes

15. (C) A GOE source with direct knowledge of the state of Bedouin-GOE negotiations said that because of the complex cultural, social, and economic factors at play, there is no

easy solution to the Bedouin-GOE problem. He predicted that short term measures, such as the release of some detainees, would help defuse some of the tension and cited ongoing discussions as a positive sign. But unless the GOE takes concrete steps to address the socio-economic aspect of the Bedouin concerns, Bedouin reliance on smuggling, which has recently received increasing international attention and is another source of GOE-Bedouin tension, will likely continue. The Bedouin threat to resume protests on July 1 may prompt additional negotiations and even minor concessions in the coming week, but a complete resolution on all issues is unlikely.

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